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AUTHOR Wrigley, Heide Spruck
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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on assessing Adult English-as-a-Second-language (ESL) literacy skills. Implementing and developing sound assessments for ESL literacy has become a big challenge--a task made even more difficult because a framework for assessments that provide useful data for ESL literacy programs has not yet been developed. To help clarify some of the issues, this document compares standardized tests and alternative assessments and provides some examples of effective alternative assessments used in the field. Specific sections address the following: (1) how ESL is currently assessed; (2) what the role of standardized testing is in adult ESL literacy; (3) what kinds of standardized tests are common; (4) what some of the advantages and shortcomings are of standardized tests; (5) what alternative assessment is; (6) and what alternative approaches to assessment show promise. (Contains 25 references.)

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ERIC Q&A

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Learner Assessment in Adult ESL Literacy

by Helde Spruck Wrigley
Aguirre International, San Mateo, CA

"You can't send that to Springfield."

Massachusetts funder responding to a teacher who explains that she gets a good sense of her students' progress by observing what they do in the classroom. (quoted in Balliro, 1989)

Learner assessment is one of the most troublesome areas of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy. On the one hand, programs face demands for valid and reliable tests that can be used for program comparison; on the other, there are strong calls to keep assessment program-based and learner-centered. Disillusioned with standardized tests and concerned about ongoing demands for accountability and documentation of effectiveness, literacy educators are searching for assessments that are fair to learners, informative to teachers, and acceptable to funders and other outside stakeholders. Implementing or developing sound assessments for ESL literacy has become a big challenge—a task made even more difficult because a framework for assessments that provide useful data for ESL literacy programs has not yet been developed. To help clarify some of the issues, this paper compares standardized tests and alternative assessments and provides some examples of effective alternative assessments used in the field.

Assessment is complex because it cannot be discussed apart from other program issues. Because curriculum and assessment are linked, the *what*, *how*, and *why* of assessment reflect a program's view of language, literacy, and learning, whether these ideas are consciously articulated or not. Which assessments are chosen and how the assessment process is carried out not only illustrate "what counts as success" (Auerbach, in press), but also reveal something about the roles that learners and teachers play in the program. In essence, assessment decisions are pedagogical (and in some cases political) decisions that reflect the philosophies, theories, and approaches that a program supports (Wrigley, in press).

How is ESL literacy currently assessed?

Given the many perspectives on the roles, functions, and uses of literacy, it is not surprising that approaches to literacy assessment in adult programs vary widely as well. Some programs focus on evaluating communicative competence through integrated tests; others concentrate on particular skill areas such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. While most literacy assessments measure knowledge and performance by asking learners to choose the right answer on multiple choice tests, there is increasing support for assessments that try to capture actual reading and writing performance as well as reading and writing processes, through assessments such as interviews, surveys of literacy behaviors and practices, and portfolios. The assessments that programs use can be divided into the following three categories (see also Lytle & Wolf, 1989):

1. *Standardized, norm-referenced tests that are designed to measure the achievement, knowledge, and skills of large groups of learners across programs.*

Standardized tests are most commonly used to assess reading or listening comprehension, oral responses to verbal or visual clues, and knowledge and use of correct grammar, spelling, and writing mechanics. Some standardized tests also include functional writing and other performance-based tasks.

2. *Materials-based assessments, which can be defined as "check-ups taken upon completion of a particular set of materials"* (Lytle & Wolf, 1989, p. 47).

Materials-based assessments link teaching and testing and are often used in individualized instruction, such as tutoring or computer-assisted instruction, to place students in the appropriate skills levels and to check progress and achievement. Commercially available, these assessments are part of an overall learning package that, like standardized tests, seek to limit teacher judgment.

3. *Alternative, program-based assessments that reflect the educational approach and literacy curriculum of a particular program and focus on literacy practices, perceptions, and performance along with the impact the program is having on learners' lives.*

Program-based assessments fall into two categories: (a) assessments that focus on discrete skills, such as spelling lists, competency checklists, true/false tests, or multiple choice tests of reading passages; and (b) integrated assessments that look at language and literacy holistically, such as portfolios or reading response journals.

What is the role of standardized testing in adult ESL literacy?

When it comes to systematic assessment across programs, standardized tests dominate adult education. This is true for ESL, adult literacy, and ESL literacy, and to a lesser extent mother-tongue literacy, because such tests are not widely available in other languages. One reason for the popularity of standardized assessments may lie in the history of testing in the United States, which has emphasized the need for program accountability above the need for quality teaching (Resnick & Resnick, 1985).

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What kinds of standardized tests are common?

Most large adult literacy programs use some form of commercially available standardized test to report both demographic data and information on skill levels to their funding source. The most common tests are group-administered adult basic skills tests such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE), or selected portions of the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS).

While some literacy programs use the TABE or the ABLE for both their native English speakers and their second language learners, others use tests specifically designed for ESL students such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), which includes an oral interview section, or the Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL), which provides for a grammatical analysis of spoken language samples. Some ESL literacy programs report success with the Henderson/Moriarty Test, which has not been standardized.

What are some of the advantages and shortcomings of standardized tests?

Standardized tests are used because they offer certain advantages: (a) their construct validity and scoring reliability have been tested, (b) they are cost-effective and do not require a great deal of training to administer, (c) funding sources accept them as part of the documentation of program accountability, (d) they allow for comparisons across programs, and (e) they give learners a sense of where they stand compared with students in other programs (see also Brindley, 1989).

In the eyes of many teachers, the standardized tests now available have a number of shortcomings when used with ESL literacy learners.

- Language, literacy, and culture are not treated distinctly; that is, they do not tell us whether a learner has trouble with an item because he or she is unfamiliar with the cultural notion underlying the task (e.g., writing a check), lacks the requisite knowledge of English vocabulary or sentence structure, or does not have enough experience with reading and writing to complete the task;
- These tests reduce the complexity of language and literacy learning to a set of skills and ignore the social contexts of literacy;
- They do not reflect what has been taught and do not capture all the learning that has taken place, especially in the affective domain;
- They do not capture changes in language use and literacy practice beyond the classroom and do not provide data on the sociolinguistic dimensions of language and literacy;
- These tests do not discriminate well at the lower end of literacy achievement, failing to capture experience with environmental print (such as familiarity with store signs and food labels); nor do they provide information on the different levels of initial literacy (e.g., being able to write the names of one's children but not those of strangers);
- They focus on pencil and paper tasks, and therefore do not provide opportunities for literacy learners to show what they can do in "real life";
- They fail to show the literacy skills that learners have acquired in their mother tongue, treating English literacy as "the only literacy that counts" (Macías, 1990);
- They do not provide useful information about individual learners, but are often misused by programs for that purpose (Sticht, 1990);
- They may be used for "gatekeeping" purposes without clear evidence that the test results justify the decisions made (National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, 1990). This is particularly problematic in workplace literacy programs where test results may be used to exclude workers from company-sponsored training or from promotion (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990).

Many literacy educators find standardized tests incongruent with good practices, because these tests do not reflect the kind of meaning-based, learner-centered, process-oriented literacy they are trying to teach. In reaction to standardized tests that look for predetermined responses and judge achievement by external standards, many educators are asking for assessments that reflect the focus of their particular program and help illuminate the relationship between teaching and learning. Others see alternative assessments as an effective way to supplement the standardized tests they use to compare large groups of students.

What is alternative assessment?

In an effort to make assessment more responsive to the concerns of learners and teachers, many programs are developing alternatives to standardized tests. Although these assessments span a wide range of types, they tend to share the following characteristics:

- They are program-based; that is they tend to reflect a particular program's view of what counts as progress and provide the information that the program seeks, although in many cases their content validity or inter-rater reliability has not yet been established;
- They are developed by the individual program, sometimes with the help of evaluators and other researchers, rather than by a testing agency;
- They focus on learning *processes*, not just outcomes, allowing learners to think about their answers to prompts or questions, discuss them, and change their minds, if appropriate; they do not insist on a "cold start" response, in which there is a single correct answer, and learners get only one chance to select among alternatives (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991);
- They actively involve learners in the assessment process by giving them the opportunity to discuss their goals and interests in literacy, choose the kinds of reading and writing they want to be evaluated on, and talk about what they have learned. In other words, they are part of a process wherein assessment is done *with* adults, not *to* them (Wolfe, 1988; McGrail & Purdom, 1991).

Most important perhaps, alternative assessments go beyond traditional skills-based notions of language and literacy. Carried out as part of an initial outreach and intake process, and repeated at intervals during the teaching cycle, they include the dimensions of literacy deemed important by the program, including (a) the functions and uses of literacy in the community (sometimes referred to as "literacy practices"); (b) the role that language and literacy play in learners' lives, including their needs, goals, and interests in English and literacy; (c) the social networks that allow learners to negotiate successfully through a print-dependent society; (d) the skills they have developed in processing written information (in their mother tongue and in English); (e) the

strategies they use to make sense of print and express themselves in writing.

Increasingly, alternative assessments are focusing on nonlinguistic factors as well, such as learners' changing perceptions of what it means to be literate or how to help their children enjoy literacy, learners' increased confidence in their ability to deal with tasks that require literacy, and a broader appreciation of the written word.

Context issues are starting to play a role in assessment as well, especially in family and workplace literacy programs. Many programs try to collect data on the institutional barriers that hinder learner participation and literacy success, such as lack of available child care or transportation (see Brod, 1990; Cumming, 1992), a work environment that regards bilingualism as a problem rather than a resource, or a school system that is insensitive to the needs of language minority parents.

What alternative approaches show promise?

Some of the alternative assessments now used in adult ESL literacy programs have been common in K-12 ESL contexts, conventional adult ESL (not necessarily focused on literacy), and foreign language teaching. These include indirect measures of general language proficiency such as dictations, cloze tests, retellings, or miscue analysis, or somewhat more direct measures such as oral interviews, role plays, or writing samples. Performance-based assessments that ask learners to complete tasks or take part in simulations have also had a place in language assessment. The following assessments are receiving special attention in the literature that focuses primarily on ESL literacy (and to a lesser degree on oral language proficiency) (see also Santopietro & Peyton, 1991).

Learner-teacher conferences focus on whether learners have made changes in their literacy practices (when, where, and how they read); increased the range of literacy materials they use (movie guides, newspapers, letters); or made changes in the support systems they use, the support they provide to others (spouses, children), or the types of literacy interactions in their families (listening to children read to them, writing notes to the teacher, taking children to cultural events) (Auerbach, 1989; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989).

Reading and writing profiles not only assess language and literacy skills that learners have, but also focus on the strategies they use. Skills may include competencies such as addressing an envelope or following directions as they appear on street signs, while strategies may focus on using context to predict meaning (through environmental print activities, for example). Quite often, these profiles include data on affective factors as well (e.g., volunteering information or expressing emotion in writing) (Wrigley, 1992).

Reading files and free reading logs record what learners have read and their reactions to it (McGrail & Purdom, 1991). In some cases, these files include checklists of what learners can read, do read, and would like to read (e.g., the Bible, newspapers, letters from home, *TV Guide*, bills, advertisements, recipes, children's report cards, paychecks). Other programs may use an index box in which students place cards that indicate what they read, when they read it, and how they like it (Kucer, 1989).

Learner evaluation grids or charts guide teachers in observing and commenting on student interaction with print (L. McGrail, personal communication). Whole language programs often check categories such as "uses background knowledge and personal (communication) experience to get the big picture" (e.g., being able to tell a grade report from a vaccination record) or "uses knowledge of numbers to make appropriate decisions" (e.g., finding deadlines for paying an electricity bill, locating important dates on a traffic ticket, or identifying the number on a winning lottery ticket). Other programs may combine skills (e.g., firm grasp of the Roman alphabet) with metacognitive awareness (e.g., knows what he or she wants to learn) and other nonlinguistic factors, such as employment goals and health status (see Collignon, Isserlis, & Smith, 1991).

Portfolios contain samples of work that shows learner progress along with comments on the work done. In many cases, learners choose the work they want to see included, such as pieces of other people's writing they have enjoyed reading, their favorite language experience stories, or samples of their best writing. As a rule, teachers help learners organize the information and, in collaboration with other teachers, decide on procedures for analyzing and interpreting the data (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Wolf, 1989).

Learner profiles contain comments on learners' general language development in ESL and their progress in reading and writing in their primary language and in English. To help teachers manage classroom observations and allow for comparisons across classrooms, these records often contain forms, charts, and scales that show how learners are becoming more fluent and independent in their reading and writing. In some programs, these profiles include information from learner files, such as data on attendance and assignments completed, as well as autobiographical information (Barrs, 1990).

Questionnaires and surveys probe the reactions of stakeholders, such as employers, representatives from the learners' community, or family members. These may seek data such as levels of satisfaction with the program; observed changes at the workplace; perceived increases in skill levels or attitude; growing interest in school related communication, job placement, or advancement; and other changes attributable to participation in the program (Rigg, 1991).

In spite of their obvious strengths, alternative assessments are often suspect in the eyes of funders. Concerned that such assessments are too tied to individual classrooms and not always trustworthy as a basis for program comparisons, funding agencies often prefer standardized tests in spite of their limitations. In trying to gain widespread acceptance for alternative assessments, the field thus faces a tremendous challenge—how to develop assessments that inform teachers and learners about whether their efforts have been successful and at the same time meet the standards for trustworthiness and reliability that funders require.

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